

John Somerville

WAR, OMNICIDE AND SANITY: THE LESSON OF THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS

I wish to dedicate this article to my dear friend Adam Schaff not only because we have worked together over so many years in so many different contexts on the problems of world peace, but because Professor Schaff's whole philosophic lifework, still in process, has been a uniquely powerful source of inspiration for all the progressive philosophers of this country and the contemporary world.

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Dean Rusk, as U. S. Secretary of State during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, was of course one of President Kennedy's top advisers, though not the chief one. That role seems to have been played by the President's brother Robert, then United States Attorney General, who appears to have shared his every thought. It was Robert Kennedy who was selected by the President to negotiate with Dobrynin, the Soviet Ambassador, and to deliver the final decisive ultimatum to the Soviets. Fortunately, Robert wrote a detailed account of how every decision was made in the crisis, and he certainly had no motive to make anything look worse than it really was. He was in the middle of it, and he told the whole ghastly truth about it. He evidently felt he owed this to future generations, and that feeling must have been mixed with anguish, for he could not bring himself to publish his memoir while he was alive. This was done by Ted Sorensen, Presidential Counsel and friend of the Kennedys, who was also in the group of top advisers. The first printing of Robert Kennedy's memoir, *Thirteen Days*, had the entirely accurate subtitle, "How the World Almost Ended."

The painful, almost unbelievable facts revealed by Robert Kennedy show clearly that the secret Mr. Rusk is now sharing with the world, a secret which he terms a "post script" to the crisis, is essentially wishful thinking, a grasping at mere straws in an understandable but vain attempt to establish a moral justification for the decisions our side actually made. Since this secret, if it had really had any operative significance in the crisis, would have put things in a better moral light for us, it is hard to understand why Mr. Rusk did not make it public long ago. In any case it is a strangely convoluted secret.

He chose to divulge it in a letter to a conference of experts on the Cuban missile crisis in these words, as quoted by *The New York Times*

of August 28, 1987: "President Kennedy instructed me to telephone the late Andrew Cordier (a former U. N. official), then at Columbia University, and dictate to him a statement which would be made by His Excellency U Thant, then Secretary General of the United Nations, proposing the removal both of the Jupiters (U. S. missiles in Turkey) and the (Soviet) missiles in Cuba. Mr. Cordier was to put that statement in the hands of U Thant only after a further signal from us. That step was never taken and the statement I furnished to Mr. Cordier has never seen the light of day. So far as I know, President Kennedy, Andrew Cordier and I are the only ones who knew of this particular step." Mr. Rusk adds, "It was clear to me that President Kennedy would let the Jupiters in Turkey become an obstacle to the removal of the missile sites in Cuba because the Jupiters were coming out in any event." *The Times* quotes Mr. Rusk further as saying that the statement given to Cordier "was simply an option that would have been available to President Kennedy had he wanted to use it."

It is self-evident that all this intricate, covert maneuvering has to do only with the manner in which the peaceful option of a reciprocal removal of missile bases would have been accepted by our side if, as Mr. Rusk himself emphasizes, President Kennedy could still decide to use it, and really wanted to use it. The only significance it has is procedural, not substantive. It simply would have created the appearance that the President was accepting the peaceful option not because it had been proposed by the Soviets but because it had been proposed by the United Nations. Mr. Rusk offered no evidence at all that President Kennedy in his actual decisions kept that option open and available. However, the media have widely interpreted the secret to mean that President Kennedy did keep the option open and available in such a way that, whenever he became convinced that any other of action would lead to war, he would indeed accept the peaceful and reciprocal removal of missile bases. If Mr. Rusk agrees with that interpretation then he is really contending that everything Robert Kennedy said about this utterly central point in his memoir was wrong. I doubt he would want to do that, but I must admit that my own correspondence with Mr. Rusk might suggest such a possibility.

In 1976 when I was writing my docudrama about the Cuban missile problem, called *The Crisis; True Story About How the World Almost Ended*, which was directly based on Robert Kennedy's memoir, I wrote Mr. Rusk to ask him about this central question. I pointed out that Robert Kennedy in his memoir was emphasizing that the final decision of the President and his advisers was to send the military ultimatum to the Soviets, threatening them with war if they did not remove their missiles from Cuba immediately and unilaterally. I also stated that Robert Kennedy was emphasizing that the President did not expect the Soviets to obey the ultimatum, and did expect the war to follow, acknowledging at the same time that such a war would end mankind. My question was, how could all that be justified? Mr. Rusk replied only with the general statement that not all of those involved shared Robert Kennedy's views. In any case, let us turn to what Robert Kennedy specifically reported.

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On p. 108 of his *Thirteen Days* (New American Library edition, N. Y., 1969) recounting his conversation on delivering the American ultimatum to the Soviets, Robert Kennedy reports that he said to the Soviet Ambassador, "We had to have a commitment by tomorrow. I was not giving him an ultimatum but a statement of fact. He should understand that if they did not remove those bases we would remove them. President Kennedy had great respect for the Ambassador's country and the courage of its people. Perhaps his country might feel it necessary to take retaliatory action, but before that was over there would be not only dead Americans but dead Russians as well... He raised the question of our removing the missiles from Turkey. I told him there could be no *quid pro quo* or any arrangement made under this kind of threat or pressure... Time was running out. We had only a few more hours — we needed an answer immediately from the Soviet side. I said we must have it the next day." In other words, not only an ultimatum, but a 24-hour ultimatum.

"I returned to the White House. The President was not optimistic, nor was I. He ordered twenty-four troop-carrier squadrons of the Air Force Reserve to active duty. They would be necessary for an invasion. He had not abandoned hope, but what hope there was now rested with Khrushchev's revising his course within the next few hours. It was a hope, not an expectation. The expectation was a military confrontation by Tuesday and possibly tomorrow."

If Robert Kennedy is right that all this was said, done and expected, it is clear that President Kennedy had already completely cancelled out any possibility of using the peaceful trade-off alternative specified in the secret statement now brought forward by Mr. Rusk. The President and his advisers not only deliberately chose the military ultimatum, but expected the war and its inevitable consequences.

Most important of all from the moral standpoint are the consequences that were expected from this expected war. Robert states them on p. 106 in a sentence that must certainly be the most poignant ever to appear in a government memoir. Speaking of the President, he writes, "The thought that disturbed him the most, and that made the prospects of war much more fearful than it would otherwise have been, was the specter of the death of the children of this country and all the world — the young people who had no role, who had no say, who knew nothing even of the confrontation, but whose lives would be snuffed out like everyone else's." Nothing less than that was expected — the annihilation of the whole human race. That was what weighed so heavily on Robert Kennedy's conscience. This was the first time in human history that a group of men, who possessed the physical power to end the human world, deliberately took a decision which they consciously expected would have that very result. Robert Kennedy acknowledges the enormity of what was thus involved on the very first page of his memoir where he says, "This was the beginning of the Cuban missile crisis — a confrontation between the two giant atomic nations, the U. S. and the U.S.S.R. which brought the world to the abyss of nuclear destruction and the end of mankind." That the world did not end on that

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occasion is, in view of the facts, something for which our side can hardly claim any moral or physical credit. It was a surprise to us, as Mr. Rusk concedes, but still wants to take the credit for it.

At the conclusion of Robert Kennedy's memoir, his friend Theodore Sorensen, who put it into print, appends the following "Note" that all of us ought to ponder. "It was Robert Kennedy's intention to add a discussion of the basic ethical question involved: what, if any, circumstance or justification gives this government or any government the moral right to bring its people and possibly all people under the shadow of nuclear destruction? He wrote this book in the summer and fall of 1967 on the basis of his personal diaries and recollections, but never had an opportunity to rewrite or complete it." Robert Kennedy agonized over that question — what would give anyone the right to end the world? — but, not surprisingly, did not find an answer, and was honest enough not to pretend there was any sane answer.

The question that also necessarily arises in this particular case is, why did our decision makers feel compelled to reject the peaceful alternative of reciprocal removal of the respective missile bases? For it was acknowledged that under international law the U.S.S.R. had as much right to accept Cuba's invitation to put missile bases in Cuba as we had to accept Turkey's invitation to put missile bases in Turkey, which is even closer to the U.S.S.R. than Cuba is to us. In fact, this seemed so obvious to Adlai Stevenson, our Ambassador to the U. N. at the time, who was also a member of the President's "Ex Comm" (the group of top advisers — Executive Committee of the National Security Council), that he persistently argued for that settlement, maintaining also that it would not materially affect the balance of power between our country and the U.S.S.R.

However, there was little or no support given to this view for reasons brought out by Kennedy. On p. 49 of *Thirteen Days* he reports what happened when Stevenson "strongly advocated... that we make it clear to the Soviet Union that if it withdrew its missiles from Cuba, we would be willing to withdraw our missiles from Turkey and Italy, and give up our naval base at Guantanamo Bay. There was an extremely strong reaction from some of the participants to his suggestion, and several sharp exchanges followed. The President, although he rejected Stevenson's suggestion, pointed out that he had for a long period held reservations about the value of Jupiter missiles in Turkey and Italy, and some time ago had asked the State Department to conduct negotiations for their removal, but now, he said, was not the time to suggest the action, and we could not abandon Guantanamo Bay under threat from the Russians."

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(before
Robert Kennedy)

On p. 94 he again writes, "The fact was that the proposal the Russians made was not unreasonable and did not amount to a loss to the U.S. or to our NATO allies. On several occasions over the period of the past eighteen months, the President had asked the State Department to reach an agreement with Turkey for the withdrawal of Jupiter missiles in that country. They were clearly obsolete, and our Polaris submarines in the Mediterranean give Turkey far greater protection.

"At the President's suggestion, Secretary Rusk had raised the question with the representatives of Turkey following a NATO meeting in the spring of 1962. The Turks objected, and the matter was permitted to drop. In the summer of 1962, when Rusk was in Europe, President Kennedy raised the question again. He was told by the State Department that they felt it unwise to press the matter with Turkey. But the President disagreed. He wanted the missiles removed... The State Department representatives discussed it again with the Turks and finding they still objected, did not press the matter.

"The President" — Robert Kennedy continues — "believed he was President and that, his wishes having been made clear, they would be followed and the missiles removed... He was angry. He obviously did not wish to order the removal of the missiles from Turkey under threat from the Soviet Union. On the other hand he did not want to involve the U.S. and mankind in a catastrophic war over missile sites in Turkey that were antiquated and useless. He pointed out to the State Department and the others that to reasonable people, a trade of this kind might look like a very fair suggestion, that our position had become extremely vulnerable, and that it was our own fault." But still it was decided that the ultimatum had to be sent. And it was sent.

Anger as a factor contributing to the final decision to send the ultimatum arose also from the widespread indignation over the original discovery that our side had been deceived by the Soviets after they had assured us they were not placing offensive weapons in Cuba. Of course, the Soviet reply was that the weapons were not offensive but defensive, and that Cuba needed them for self-defense since she had but recently been invaded at the Bay of Pigs by forces trained, equipped and financed by the U. S. government. However, the memoir shows that there was no disposition in the Ex Comm to consider any mitigating factors like the Bay of Pigs invasion, or the fact that our side had, before that invasion, given out false public assurances that we were not organizing, training and financing any such invasion, nor to our equally false public assurances that we had no spy planes flying over Soviet territory (from our bases in Turkey), until the Gary Powers spy plane was shot down. The fact that in political and diplomatic history it is taken for granted that all governments will normally lie about military secrets, did not lessen the very strong feelings that were instantly aroused by the discovery of the Soviet bases in Cuba — feelings not only in the public at large, but in Congress and the executive branch as well. Waves of pressure arose for instant military action against the bases. Even as unlikely a figure as Senator Fulbright joined in the pressure that was being brought to bear on the President, as noted by Robert Kennedy on p. 54 of his memoir.

On p. 25 he had already noted an additional factor that powerfully increased the degree of this pressure. He writes, "It was election time. The autumn days of September and October were filled with charges and countercharges. Republicans 'viewing with alarm' were claiming the U. S. was not taking the necessary steps to protect our security. Some.

such as Senator Homer E. Capehart of Indiana, were suggesting that we take military action against Cuba."

It is always emphasized by those who defend the decision our government took in the Cuban missile crisis, that President Kennedy resisted (at first) these pressures that were so insistent for immediate military action to remove the bases by a "surgical strike" as it was usually termed, "before the missile bases become operative." Because John Kennedy refused to yield to these pressures immediately the conclusion has so often been drawn that his policy in the crisis as a whole was one of restraint and moderation in the interest of peace.

But this would be to forget what the final decision actually was — a military ultimatum — and what the expectation regarding it was, that it would not be obeyed, and war would follow. Nevertheless, the political beauty, however, self-contradictory, of the ultimatum was that while it seemed restrained since it did not rush precipitately into armed action, it nevertheless chose the path of armed action, and reenforced the stance and image everyone seemed to want. That is, the stance that says to the other side: we are stronger than you, and must be so recognized; we do not have to give you equal rights; we do not have to permit you to do to us what we permit ourselves to do to you. You must therefore comply with our demand, or we will go to war against you. Equal rights might be good international law but it would be a very bad precedent for our national interests. That is what became the bottomline.

It is not too much to say that in the Ex Comm it was felt that to abandon this stance, to give up this double standard would be political suicide in the careerist sense. This is reflected on p. 67 of the memoir where Robert Kennedy recounts what he said to the President on the subject of military action, beginning with our naval blockade of Cuba, our "quarantine" as it was then called. Robert writes, "Just don't think there was any choice, I said (to the President), and not only that; if you hadn't acted, you would have been impeached." The President thought for a moment, and said, "That's what I think. I would have been impeached."

These facts, reported by the President's brother and steadfast partner, indicate some of the powerful causes that led to the final decision to send the military ultimatum which risked the end of the world, and even expected it. However unwise, imprudent and reckless that decision objectively was, the fact that the Soviets (contrary to our own expectations) obeyed the ultimatum made it look like a magic wand, a gift from a fairy godmother. It not only seduced any number of people into thinking that the policy must have been one of even-handed justice in the interest of peace; it also became an irresistible model for later administration to follow in dealing with the Soviets. Just threaten to begin the war that will blow up the world, and they will back down. "Firmness" is the word that became attached to this omnicidal paradigm — Kennedy's policy of firmness in the Cuban missile crisis.

But in actual documented fact, it thoroughly frightened Robert Kennedy, as it ought to frighten anyone who is not inclined to believe in magic

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wands and fairy godmothers. To realize that you can actually end the whole human world by nuclear incineration and radioactive poisoning which would necessitate perhaps five years of indescribable suffering and agony before the five billion souls who comprise the human family were all dead and unburied, "including all the children," is something everyone tries not to think about. The trouble is we soften the blow for ourselves by calling this and thinking of this as war, with all the old familiar connotations of courage and patriotism, and after all, human survival, because that too, always went with war, however bad and sad the war might have been.

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Robert Kennedy saw through this, although he didn't have the word that helps to make the reality clear in its qualitative difference from war — the new word "omnicide," which signifies the killing of all humans by some humans, including the killers themselves. This word forces us to face the reality: When we talk about nuclear conflict we are no longer talking about war. We are talking about omnicide, the crime so enormous that it could be committed only once, the sin so unspeakable it never even had a name. Robert Kennedy rightly sensed all this and kept it in the center of his thought, where it certainly belonged. It bothered him that in sending the ultimatum he and the rest had chosen to risk ending the world, and even had expected it to end. He kept thinking that he might be able to write that final chapter of *Thirteen Days* that would deal with the ethical question of what would justify their actual decision, but he couldn't find anything that would.

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Now, after all this, Mr. Rusk's secret is being presented to us as the happy, long lost justification of the whole thing: Allegedly, John Kennedy would have prevented the catastrophic war as soon as he ascertained the Soviets were not going to obey the ultimatum. That is the way the media have played the secret up — "Kennedy Secretly a Dove" was the headline of the *Washington Post* August 29; "Secret Fallback Plan" was the headline of *The New York Times* August 28, of long, comforting articles. Could this possibly be anything but the same magic wand of the same fairy godmother?

Let us take it seriously, and see. Rusk's whole case rests on the assumption that our President can send an ultimatum that says to the Soviets: You must remove your missiles from Cuba within twenty-four hours, and if you do not, we will bomb them and thus start war against you. And at the same time the President is actually acknowledging to his brother (unless Robert Kennedy is lying) that he does not really expect the Soviets to obey the ultimatum, and does expect the war, with all its horrendous consequences. He "hopes" the Soviets will obey; he does not "expect" them to. But, in any case the President felt compelled to send the ultimatum because of the immense public and Congressional pressure for some kind of military action to deal with the Soviet missile bases about which the Soviets had unforgivably tried to deceive us. And finally, if he did not take that kind of military approach, he would be impeached.

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Common sense and sober fact tell us that once you have, for reasons of that kind, delivered a military ultimatum to the U. S. S. R., limited

~~Secret letter - (from Exeter)~~

to twenty-four hours, an ultimatum that must necessarily become known to the whole world, you have crossed your Rubicon. There can be no turning back. But Mr. Rusk's secret is being presented to us as meaning that, after having delivered such an ultimatum, it still was possible for the President, if and when he ascertained that the Soviets were not going to obey it, to take it all back. He would then announce that he was now prepared to accept the alternative proposal of a peaceful and reciprocal removal of the missile bases because that had now been proposed also by the United Nations.

But, in the first place, how would the President ascertain that the Soviets were not going to obey the ultimatum? Would he be satisfied if he simply received a written statement from the Soviets: "We are not going to obey your ultimatum." Would he then agree to the reciprocal removal of bases, which is just what the Soviets had been proposing, and which would be recognized as such, no matter who or what now additionally would propose it? Would he be content thus to expose himself to the American electorate, to Congress, and to the whole world as one who first sent such an ultimatum to the Soviets, and then ignominiously backed down and retracted it just as soon as he learned that the Soviets were not going to obey it? Would that not be an unthinkable negation of the very reasons for having delivered the ultimatum? What kind of "fallback plan" is that? It would have doubly invited impeachment.

Of course, there would still be two other ways of ascertaining that the Soviets were not going to obey the ultimatum. One of these is that the Soviets would simply do nothing; they would let the twenty-four hours go by, and wait for us to drop the first bomb. If we did not drop it, but said we were now ready to accept the peaceful alternative of reciprocal removal of the bases it would be the same case of our President publicly backing down after having taken a strong stand, the very image that the President admitted he could never politically afford. The remaining way he would know that the Soviets were not going to obey the ultimatum would of course be for them to bomb first, before the twenty-four hours had elapsed. Then, also, it would of course be too late for the President to implement the secret statement, to transform himself from the proud, threatening eagle of the ultimatum to the peaceful, submissive dove of the Rusk letter. That would have been an unthinkable public capitulation under fire. The secret statement thus turns out to be a sad case of what someone once called "the murder of a beautiful theory by a gang of brutal facts."

Operatively, objectively and substantively, the secret statement never could have meant anything once the ultimatum had been delivered. John Kennedy himself realized that better than anyone else. If he still dictated the secret statement one can only conclude that he meant it as a kind of confession that what he was saying in the statement represented the decision he had wanted to make, that he recognized it as ethically and physically the only right decision. But at the same time he considered himself compelled to make a very different decision for political reasons.

These were reasons that preferred ending the human world to granting the Soviets equal rights; reasons that represent the ultimate variant of better dead than red — better no world at all than a world with the Soviets as our equals.

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The President was thus wrestling with the same problem that so troubled his brother Robert. It raised the same question that Robert was never able to answer in terms of ethical principle. But John Kennedy answered it in terms of immediate political practice and, under the pressures upon him, he chose the path of military action even though he admittedly expected it to lead to war and the end of the world. The only reason the world didn't end then was that the Soviets *unexpectedly* chose to have it continue even though this cost them a temporary political defeat.

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Years later Theodore Sorensen wrote an article in *The New York Times* in which he warned President Nixon not to try to use in Vietnam the same tactics that John Kennedy had used in the Cuban missile crisis because they were far too dangerous; the fact that they succeeded then, he admitted, was only luck. As for the beautiful but unworkable theories that are murdered by gangs of brutal facts, the awful truth is that some of them will not stay dead. In politics they are like fairy tales that have a life of their own in the mythologies that play an all too real role in our practical political life and death. President Reagan's administration has certainly resurrected the "strong" (Rambo) stance of Kennedy's policy as his model of how to deal with the Soviets. Did he too reckon on blind luck? Or has he devised a really workable fallback plan by which some secret statement could actually play the role of saving the world at the last minute in case he would have also decided to send some kind of military ultimatum to the Soviets? It would be well for him to have such a plan, as it is now universal doctrine in the U. S. S. R. that Kennedy's policy in the Cuban missile crisis was really nuclear blackmail, and they are firmly resolved never to give in to it again.

Wishful thinking always presupposes some very strong wish, and it is fair to say that the documentation in *Thirteen Days* indicates the understandably strong reasons Mr. Rusk has for wishing to think that "President Kennedy would not let the Jupiter missiles in Turkey become an obstacle to the removal of the missile sites in Cuba because the Jupiters were coming out in any event," as he expressed it to *The New York Times* in revealing his secret. The documentation shows that President Kennedy was thoroughly angry that Mr. Rusk had not carried out his (the President's) repeated instructions to remove those very missiles from Turkey month before the crisis. The President was angry precisely because he felt, as did the others, that it was now impossible to remove them as a way of settling the crisis because that would mean publicly giving in to "Soviet threat and pressure." Mr. Rusk therefore has understandably strong personal motives to believe that President Kennedy could have and would have accepted that peaceful alternative even after sending the military ultimatum to the Soviets.

But the brutal facts revealed by Robert Kennedy show why that would have been utterly impossible. The inescapable truth is that there is no way we can find any comfort at all in the policy we actually followed in the Cuban missile crisis. The only lesson we can learn from it is that this policy must be rejected because it fails to pass the simplest test of sanity. Whatever our differences may be, we can all recognize that nuclear conflict — omnicide — is now the supreme enemy of everything human, and therefore can never be an acceptable option for the policy of our country or any other country.

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a bluff — as it was for JFK —

John Somerville

though it might really have ended the world?

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except in making out SU threat to Berlin

or Turkey, as usual (i.e. K's mind).

Except to drive K to create the crisis!